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NEGRO SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN WEST AFRICA

By George W. Ellis, K.C., F.R.G.S.

Fundamentally, the aboriginal social institutions of the African tribes are substantially the same throughout the African Black Belt. An examination of the institutions of any single tribe will therefore give the social key to the African social situation. And for this purpose a representative ethnic group is selected from the peoples which now fringe the western border of the great African Sudan, commonly called the Vais.

The Vai tribe is one of the most interesting tribes in all Africa. It would be interesting if for no other reason than that, of the millions of Negroes of innumerable tribes, it has the distinction of being the only one which has its own invented national orthography.¹

Ethnologically, the Vais belong to the Mánde branch of the Negro race. They are very closely related to the Soso, Bambara, Mendi, Cossa and Mandingo peoples, and like them speak a branch of the Mánde tongue.² This family of the Negro race occupies the western part of High Sudan between the eighth and sixteenth degrees of northern latitude, extending as far east as Timbuctu. Between Senegambia and Cape Palmas, a narrow strip of lowland separates High Sudan from the Atlantic. The Mánde³ family extends into this lowland only at two points, one in the Mánde territory, the other in the country of the Vais. The tribes of this lowland speak varied languages, entirely different from the Mánde, among which may be mentioned the Basá, Kpwesi,⁴ Kirim, Nalu, Fúlup, Tímne, Baga, Balánta, Búlom and others.

¹ *Outlines of a Vai Grammar, etc.*, by S. W. Koelle, 11, London, 1854.

² *Races of Man, etc.*, Peschel, p. 466, London, 1876.

³ Mande and Mandingo from same root *manatus*, meaning a fish god, a creature worshiped by the people of Songhay tribe, Binger; also *Affairs of West Africa*, p. 211, Morell.

⁴ Generally spelled Pessey. This spelling according to system adopted in London for spelling African names: Liberia, *Geographical Journal* for August, 1905 by Sir Harry H. Johnston, K.C.M.G., K.C.B.

VAI COUNTRY A PORTION OF NEGROLAND

The Vai country is a portion of the great Negroland, the latter of which is inhabited by an estimated population of more than 30,000,000 Negroes. This Negroland was known among ancient geographers by different names, sometimes by Sudan, Ethiopia, Nigretia, Tekrour, but more generally by Genewah, from the last of which we have derived the word Guinea. The land of the Blacks, now generally known as the Sudan, is a broad strip of territory between the seventh and seventeenth parallels north latitude, extending across the African continent from the Atlantic to the southern mouth of the Red Sea, and marked by a water-belt of rivers and lakes from the Senegal to the sources of the Nile. Along the northern limits of the Sudan is the great desert of Sahara, beyond which lies the fertile strip along the Mediterranean, occupied by the Berber states. Connecting this fertile land of the north and the Negro Belt is the valley of the Nile, which suggests all those Arabian and Egyptian influences which for centuries have played upon the Negro peoples.

ORIGIN OF THE VAI PEOPLES

Rev. S. W. Koelle, who visited the Vai country about 1851 and who wrote a grammar of the Vai language, gives as his opinion that the Vais came from the interior.⁵ This opinion was based on the fact that the Vai language was bordered on the north and south by entirely different languages, the Kiriin on the north and relics of the Déwoi on the south. He also found a tradition among the Vai people "that they emigrated from a district of the Mánde country." He thought also that the Mándes not only took the country but adopted the name of the conquered people.⁶ The tradition

⁵ S. W. Koelle, *Vai Grammar*, Preface, p. iii.

⁶ There is a Mandingo word, *andavai*, meaning split from, and it seems very likely that the word Vai is derived from it. Vai scholars informed the writer that when the people now called Vais separated from the Mandingos, those remaining called those who left Vais in derision. Some stated the separation to have been caused by rival brothers contending over a Mandingan throne.

says that the Mándes were under the command of Fabule and Kiatamba.⁷

From what the writer learned in a trip across the Vai country, the opinion expressed by Reverend Koelle is not only highly probable but well attested by many considerations and facts other than those mentioned by him. The writer was informed by numerous chiefs and Vai scholars that the Vais came from the Mandingo country not only under the leadership of Kiatamba and Fabule, but Cassu and Manoba, his son. A story was told to the effect that a Mandingo king of Musardu had a son who broke a law, which according to custom forfeited his life. His father dearly loved him and escaped with him to the Tegya country and founded the Vai tribe, and later he and his followers pressed onward until the coast was reached. From all the obtainable data on the subject it seems pretty well settled that the Vais were Mandingos and came to the coast for commercial and other advantages.

NATURAL AND URBAN SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Like most of the tribes of West Africa, the Vais are distributed over a thickly wooded country of wild and tangled forests, the natural abode of poisonous reptiles and the nightly haunts of ferocious beasts. Here may be found the prowling leopard, the fierce crocodile, and the man-like chimpanzee. Here may be seen the elephant, the buffalo, the hippopotamus, and the cruel, dreaded boa constrictor, lying for days in ambush for its prey.

This section is principally drained by the Manna, Marfa, and Little Cape Mount Rivers. At Grand Cape Mount is a lovely lake, extending for miles into the interior, and beside which is a range of hills whose insular crest at the coast is some 1065 feet above the level of the sea. For seven months there is almost continual rain, and for five months it is dry with transitions of intermittent showers. The climate is

⁷ The spear which Kiatamba brought with him is said to be now at Bomie, and was exhibited to the writer during the ceremonies of the king who had just died.

damp during the rains except upon the mountains and warm during the dries. The mean average temperature at Monrovia is about 83° F. with daily variations from 77° to 90°. As in most of Africa communication is slow and difficult, and to those distant from the rivers walking is the only means.

Under these physical conditions the Vai people are scattered over the Vai country in towns and half-towns, connected with one another with narrow, winding foot-paths. The characteristic form of African society is the social group. Here isolation is not only unpleasant and exceedingly inconvenient, but absolutely dangerous and unsafe. Real native towns are the abodes of kings, past or present. In a town rice kitchens and the making of palm oil are prohibited. Towns are intended for comfort, pleasure, and the full enjoyment of the highest native life. Half-towns are for support, the main source and center of sustenance. All native towns or half-towns are built on sites for some or all of the following considerations: water, agricultural or commercial convenience, health, and military advantage. The towns are generally on hills difficult of approach to an attacking foe, while the half-towns are moved about in accord with convenience to gardens, farms and centers of trade. Commanding wide views of the neighboring country, many Vai towns are surrounded with two or three walls of barricade 25 or 30 feet apart. On the sides of approach, the ground is covered with large logs, at inconvenient distances or sharp sticks thickly stuck into the ground.

Towns are social, half-towns economic centers. In the latter are found the rice kitchens, the making of palm oil, and the raising of domestic fowls and animals. The towns consist of individual houses generally grouped together about an open space in the center and not far distant from one another with thoroughfares running both ways. With circular coneshaped roofs, the houses usually have dirt floors thrown up three or four feet above the general level. Covered on the outside with mud, the lower framework is selected from the varied and rare timbers of the country. The roofing is done with shingles made of palm branches. In the half-towns the houses generally indicate that they are temporary

structures, due to the frequent changing of the farms and half-towns.

As a rule the houses contain two rooms, and sometimes more, and when there is more than one wife there is a house for each wife. Aside from the cooking utensils there may be seen in the kitchen the rice fanners, cloth weavers, a few chairs and a hammock and the fire-hearth. In the other room used for bedroom are chairs and a bed of bamboo, wooden trunks, water pots made of clay, a rattan line for the hanging up of clothes or bamboo rack, country mats and country cloths or blankets. On the whole the towns of the Vais are kept very clean and are noticeably superior in sanitary conditions to those of neighboring tribes.

EDUCATIONAL FUNCTION OF THE "DEVIL BUSH"

The "Devil Bush" is one of the most important institutions among the Vais, indeed of most of the tribes in West Africa. It is but one of many others whose social functions differ in form, but whose ultimate aim and purpose are one. Among the various tribes it is known by different names, but its mission and principles are substantially the same. It has been the observation of the writer for nearly ten years that most of the social institutions of West African natives tend to strengthen authority and to render government less difficult, and this is especially true of the "Devil Bush," deriving this name from Europeans because of the public appearance of representatives of the institution dressed and masked as devils.

The "Devil Bush" is a secret organization, and its operations are carried on in an unknown place. The penalty for divulging its secrets is said to be death. It is exceedingly difficult to ascertain much information concerning the inner workings of this society.

The head of the society we call a "Country Devil." He has sole power and is assisted by other members of the tribe versed in the principles of the organization. The society meets in what are called sessions, varying from three to ten years. It admits males alone between the ages of seven and

fifty. When the organization is in session, under the penalty of death, no one is allowed to visit the scene of its workings. The paramount aim of this institution is to prepare the young and to drill the old for the great ends of African life. More definitely stated instruction is given in (1) the industrial trades, (2) native warfare, (3) religious duties, (4) tribal laws and customs, (5) and the social arts.

While great stress is placed upon the secrets of the society its chief function is educational as a great political and social sanction. In the application of its principles there is no respect of person or rank. The bow and arrow is called the Vai alphabet. Every morning the small boys are first taught to use skillfully this weapon. In addition they are taught to throw the spear and wield the sword. In the afternoon they are taken on a jaunt for small game, and later are given practice in target shooting and throwing the spear. After supper they take up singing and dancing and their duties to their gods. To the latter a certain portion of their meals is said to be offered. Each is given the sacrificial ceremony; and they clap, dance, and sing their songs of praise.

When the boys have attained a certain advancement, among other things they have sham battles, with 150 or 200 boys on a side. A district is given to one side to be captured by the other. Each side has a captain and much stress is laid upon the display of bravery. Sometimes the contests assume aspects of reality. When one side repulses the other six times it is said to be victorious.

The next stage involves the teaching of the actual methods employed in the higher forms of native warfare. The most difficult feat in native war is the taking of strongly fortified and barricaded towns. Where the town to be taken is defended with shot and powder, the attacking party builds a barricade around the town in a siege to cut off all communication and supplies. When thus weakened the town is attacked at some advantageous moment. If repulsed they reattack the town and storm the barricades on a dark and rainy night when the loud thundering renders their approach unheard.

Beside teaching the above method of taking towns another is taught. The attacking party is arranged around a town

four or five miles distant. A small band is sent to make the attack, with the understanding that they are to pretend to be frightened and flee. It is supposed that the smallness of their numbers will entice the warriors of the town to follow; and when attaining a certain distance they are surrounded and taken by an unexpected force.

And still another method is taught to take a town. As a friend a man is sent into the town desired to be taken. Sometimes more than one are sent. Late at night when all have retired save those on guard at the gates, these emissaries kill the sentinel at a certain gate and permit the attacking army to enter the town without the warning of the guards. Each man is supposed to take a house, and when the various warriors have seized the supplies and are ready for battle, the war cry is sounded, and as the men are fleeing for safety, amid the roar and excitement of the hour, they are pierced with spears and cut to pieces with swords wielded by warriors from unexpected quarters. It is natural in such a confused contest in the dark that some women and children should be killed, but the custom is to spare them. The leaders who escape death are afterwards executed; the women, men and children are held as slaves. And generally the town is burned to the ground.

In addition to war methods taught, the boys are taught the civil and military laws governing the Vai people. Every Vai man must know the law. And as the penalties for violating the laws covering military expeditions are so severe, the customs and laws relating thereto are of paramount importance to every Vai man.

Seldom accompanying it, the king is the commander-in-chief of the army. Before hostilities are declared and the first assault made, a challenge is sent to the enemy. The man who takes the challenge as a rule does not return; but the challenge is returned with either defiance or good will. After a battle the soldiers are reviewed by the king who executes those guilty of offenses and commends those distinguished for their bravery. On the day appointed by him to receive the chief, the prisoners are brought to be dealt with according to the decree of the king. No nobleman may be

reduced to slavery; he is usually put to death. The king executes a captured king. The following evening all engage in the glee and merriment of the war dance.

The members of the "Devil Bush" are not only taught everything pertaining to practical war, but they are taught hunting as well. After learning how to capture the small game they then take up the larger and more dangerous animals like the leopard, elephant and the buffalo. What the Africans call a real hunt requires about a month in preparation at hard work. The boys dig a large pit and surround the ends and sides with the trunks of large trees. With the pit at the apex, in triangular form two fences are built about a mile long, sometimes more or less, and with a like distance between the two outer extremities. The surrounding country is encircled by the hunters and the animals are driven into the pit. The smaller animals are eaten and the larger ones are sent to the king. As the valuable skins are preserved, the boys are taught to skin animals neatly. The ivories belong to the king, and various small horns are kept for fetiches and amulets. These hunts are usually accompanied with singing and dancing, after the cooking and eating of the game.

There are many other things taught in the "Devil Bush," and some of the things to which reference has been made, under Liberian and European influences, have receded into the interior and others yet have been discontinued altogether. There is another organization called "Allebigah." This is purely a secret lodge and has extensive influence among West African tribes. The chief object of this lodge is to protect the individual member, and it is said that it will protect at all hazards. This society has lodges among the Vai, Mandingo, Kpwesi, Buni, Bandi, Bere, Gizima, Gora, and Dé tribes and discharges the functions of our ordinary secret societies.

ETHICS AND EDUCATION OF "GREEGREE BUSH"

The "Greegree Bush" is a society for the training of girls for future life, just as the "Devil Bush" is for boys. It has obtained this name from a little red poisonous berry, from

which a medicine is made, and which is placed in a little horn and worn around the neck of every girl in the institution. It is death for a man to be found within the limits of this society whatever may be his motive. The sessions of the organization are held near some town, yet few in that town know the exact place. No one is permitted to approach the scene. It is said that the "Greegree Bush" begins when a girl who has not been in it pours water upon the head of the Zo who is generally in all of the towns. Those who have been in the Bush catch the candidate and hold her, and send word to all the neighboring towns that a "Greegree Bush" is to be organized at once.

The organization is under the direction of a Zo and a Zo-Nockba. The Zo is the owner of the Bush and she comes to town for the Greegree plays. The Zo-Nockba is the one versed in the art of training the girls in the aim and principles of the society and during plays remains therein. The Bush is in session from three to seven years and may be less. Upon the death of the king or Zo the Bush always breaks up. The attendants may be anywhere from 5 to 200. Girls are usually admitted at from six to eight years of age, although women may be admitted. A native woman is never considered much or highly respected unless she has been in this institution. At the time of entrance, a little horn with medicine and some little red berries, is placed upon the necks of the girls. If a girl violates her virginity while this horn is on her neck, she is tied facing the violator, and both are stripped naked and whipped publicly in the town, and must pay a large fine before they may be released. At one time the penalty was death to both, and it is still death if the girl is in the Bush.

When the Bush is over, early in the morning, the Zo removes from the necks of the maids the little horns; for as long as worn they cannot marry, nor must they be violated by any man. The expense of the Bush is borne by the parents who have children there. Women are not allowed to look upon the "Country Devil." He is hideously dressed in a long gown; has a wooden head with silver stripes around the eyes, shoes on the feet, and many native additions to make his appear-

ance as frightful as possible. A visit is recalled to Dàdoo, a Vai town, where the king had died only a few days before. The three "Country Devils" in attendance at the plays came suddenly through the streets about eight o'clock at night. Such terror! The women and children, in fact, everybody were running and screaming and falling over each other in an endeavor to get into the houses. This "Country Devil" is a woman dressed as a man. It is impossible for anybody to see the "Country Devil" from the "Devil Bush," except he belongs to the society.

The "Greegree Bush" has an industrial and educational side. The girls are taught to embroider with gold and silver thread the tunics and togas of kings and chiefs. Some of them become very artistic in working palm trees, golden elephants, moons, half-moons, running vines, flowers, nature scenes and other objects in nature for various articles in dress and apparel. The Africans have a number of neat ways of dressing hair peculiarly adapted to conditions and to them. Three methods are recalled as examples. Using the center of the crown of the head, one way is to plait it in rows in all directions with the ends turned in with a stick, comb or ivory instrument made for the purpose. Another is to plait it lengthwise of the head; and still another is to plait the hair with the ends out in single plaits, arranged in rows. The girls are taught hair dressing that they may plait, besides their own, the hair of the richer Vais, some of whom have their hair oiled and plaited two or three times a week.

Instruction is given in cutting inscriptions on shields, breast-plates, and the like, housekeeping, singing, dancing, farming, sewing, weaving cotton, dyeing, making nets and mats and many other articles of domestic and commercial utility, decoration and dress. The writer has seen many Vai women making some of the most beautiful African blankets to be found anywhere along the west coast. In this institution the girls are taught their duty to the king, the law, and especially that which refers to the women. Girls are taught their duty to their parents, to their future husbands, and the other duties belonging to the common lot of Vai women. Of course the influence of the "Greegree Bush" is

considerably weakened by the republican institutions of Liberia on the one hand and by the faith and practices of Islam on the other. The greatest power of this institution is now in the interior of the Vai country, and it is almost nothing near the Liberian settlements.

MARRIAGE AND THE WEST AFRICAN FAMILY

Courtship and marriage among the Vais seem very simple. The casual observer would think them devoid of love; but they have their romances, their loves and dreams, their Romeos and their Juliets. Behind what seem to be mere form and custom are sentiments, though crude in some, which in other races are called love.

It is customary for the father, when he thinks necessary, to provide his sons with wives. The son may be permitted to select his own wife. In either case the preliminaries vary but very little. If the girl is very small, a straw is put into her hair by the suitor or his father. When a young man sees a maid he desires for his wife, he calls upon her parents and presents them with a present, varying in value and amount according to his wealth and standing. This is required to insure good faith on the part of the suitor. The making of these presents is called a "dash," which is very popular among native West Africans. This "dash" may consist of gin, rum, brass kettles, cloth, etc.

At the time the suitor calls and presents his "dash" to the parents he also confesses his love for their daughter. If the proposal is accepted and the contracting parties reside in the same town, arrangements are made for the couple to see each other from time to time. Just as the father usually provides his sons with wives, so the parents of the girls generally arrange for their husbands.

Most of the girls are placed in the institution called the "Greengree Bush," and when they come out, if not already betrothed, are on the marriage market. Very few girls in families of standing are not engaged long before they enter the "Greengree Bush." The statement is here made upon the best of authority that engagements have been made

before the child was born, on condition that it was a girl. The explanation of this is family prestige. When a girl is about to be married she must be washed. The washing is supposed to wash away the "Greegree Bush Devil." For as long as unwashed she cannot be married. This washing is a ceremony with expense connected with it, which is paid by the parents of the bride to be.

When the man has built his home and is ready for his wife, her people dress her up and take her to him. The groom then "dashes" her entire family, leopard teeth, kettles, cloth, and one or two servants, the amount never to be less than the expenditures of the parents in the rearing of the girl, including her training in the "Greegree Bush." During the period of engagement the young man must present gifts, from time to time, to the parents of his betrothed, of such things as they may need and desire.

When a young man marries a girl from another town, she brings to her husband some of everything she has, such as rice, platatoes, worro, salt, pepper, honey, palm oil, water, and even small fish which she throws into the streams. She does this for independence. So that if at any time she is taunted by her acquaintances of the town, she may reply that she has brought her own things, and is therefore independent of them. Virginity is very highly prized by the Vais, as it is among most West African tribes unaffected by outside influences.

It is the custom of the parents to guarantee the virtue of their daughter given in marriage. If she is not a virgin, the husband may annul the marriage if desired and return the girl. He may recover what he has spent in "dashes" to the girl and her parents in his suit. On the other hand if she proves to be a virgin, the husband shoots a gun. He breaks the good news to his wife's family and accompanies it with presents. And for two or three days there is a general rejoicing in both families and among their friends.

The family among the Vais is polygamic. This form of marriage naturally leads to a broader definition than what obtains among the civilized nations of today. All of the relatives of a Vai man and wife are members of his family. Every man may have one or more wives but he must provide

a separate house for each. While every man may have plural wives, the most of them have but one. And yet the poor man is about as able to secure the poor women as the richer man the richer women. Moreover, the Vai women, when once obtained, are a source of economic strength. By their industry most of the farming is carried on, and most of the products for dress and domestic use are made by their skill and labor. The women also obtain and prepare many of the articles for domestic and foreign trade.

The Vai women are gentle to their children, and sometimes very loving. The rights of parents over their issue have been very great. At one time children might be killed for disobedience and disrespect, but Liberian and other influences have wrought important modifications. A child may still be pawned. Along the coast the marriage bond is very loose, but far into the interior a wife may not be put aside at the pleasure of her husband. When men are away for a time, upon their return, they test the fidelity of their wives by the sassawood ordeal. This ordeal involves the drinking of so much poisonous liquid made from the sassawood bark and is very much dreaded; and no doubt is a very strong deterrent to some who might be tempted to be unfaithful.

When the wife leaves her husband for another man, the husband may recover from the latter, in addition to the purchase money, the value of every article given to his wife during marriage. If she leaves for any other reason her husband may compel her return through her parents, or the return of the purchase money and the value of all gifts to the daughter. The ultimate social fact to which attention is called is that wives are not bought as commodities as so many believe and the gifts made in prosecuting the courtship suit are mere tokens of sincerity and good faith.

A wife may be divorced for witchcraft or adultery, but for the latter a valuable consideration in goods and money is sometimes accepted by the injured husband. When a Vai man has a number of wives he always has a headwife to whom the other wives are somewhat subordinate; and upon his death his wives become subject to his eldest brother. And the wife does not become the property of the eldest son, as

observed by Mr. Ellis among the Yoruba-speaking peoples of the slave coast of West Africa.

NATURE AND INFLUENCE OF WITCHCRAFT

Witchcraft is common to certain stages of intellectual growth. Every great nation of the earth has had its beliefs in some form of witchcraft. This was true of the Arabians, Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, and even the modern nations of Europe. Shakespeare opens *Macbeth* with witches. Dr. Johnson was touched by Queen Anne, and Draper says that Luther was not free from witchcraft. The belief in the touch of the king as a cure for scrofula was once held by the University of Oxford and the clergy in the palmiest days of the English Church.

It is natural, therefore, that we should expect to find some strange superstitions among the Vais, surrounded by the peculiar and extraordinary conditions of West Africa. The Vais believe that their dead are transformed into animals and birds and return to certain persons who employ them to the injury of others. The varied and uninterpreted phenomena of nature have impressed them with the existence of countless invisible spirits which visit calamity and death upon them. They believe that these spirits are in league with or under the direction of certain people, commonly known as wizards and witches; they call them *sua-kai* and *sua-musu*, *sua-kai* meaning man and *sua-musu* woman. A person practicing witchery is called *sua-mo*, *sua* meaning milt, used to test the practice of witchcraft, and *mo* meaning man or person.

If anybody dies suddenly or mysteriously, it is believed that he is either a witch or has been witched. Everybody is examined at death except the Muhammadans and the chief women of the "Greegree Bush." On the postmortem examination, if certain portions inside are found black and the *sua* refuses to float, the person is pronounced a witch. According to sex the person is called *sua-kai* or *sua-musu*. The body is dishonored, deprived of all ceremonies, and is buried outside of the limits of the town. This disgrace is supposed to attach to the family of the discovered witch.

In case the test fails to establish the person as a witch, they set about to find the witch who caused the death of the deceased. To prove guilt or innocence a number of suspected persons are subjected to one of the native ordeals, the sassa-wood and palm oil ones being the most commonly employed. Somebody is usually convicted and suffers the disgrace and death of a witch. This is the most dreaded and dangerous class of witches. It is believed that they go about at night riding people and bringing upon them sickness, death, and all kinds of calamities.

The Vais have among them a man whom they call a *beri-mo*, *beri* meaning medicine, *greegree* or poison, and *mo* man. He is commonly called a medicine man. This was no doubt his original vocation, as indicated by the name, to administer medicine to the sick. But he has undergone an evolution and has considerably increased his functions and powers. He has been instrumental in spreading the belief that he is in communion with the invisible spirits and exercises some control over their conduct. So the Vais believe that they can secure medicine from the *beri-mo* that will bring evil upon an enemy. His services are secured to witch an adversary, and the last of his many added powers is to give medicine that will counteract the influence of witch-medicine prepared by another *beri-mo*.

There is another belief that witches in coming to your house, as they enter the door, the skin is taken off and laid aside in the house. It is said that when a person is taken out he is returned to his bed by the witch, and that the witch may be killed by sprinkling salt and pepper in certain portions of the room, which will prevent the witch from putting on his skin. Just before going to bed it is common to see some *Vai* people sprinkling salt and pepper about the room.

It is thought that witches take babies out at night and sacrifice them at witch-plays. Some say that the babies are cooked in the small country pots. Parents often go to the *beri-mo* and get medicine which is put on the outside of the door in a little horn; that is thought sufficient to keep the witch from entering the house and getting into his skin, supposed to be seen in the bed. They say the horn will

fight the witch at the door until daylight, when they can catch the witch. The person usually suspected is in the house in bed but they say that is only his skin, and cite instances when by this method they have caught witches.

The alligator is sacred to the Vais. Along the rivers and the banks of the Peso Lake, they are frequent visitors of the native towns. To kill one, they say, is death. They have what are called alligator societies, the objects of which are to enrich the members, and make them through witchcraft able to destroy their enemies. It requires the strongest nerve to become a member of one of these societies, for if required to do so one must sacrifice the dearest of his relatives. In order to join one must pay the required fee and "dash" to a member who goes to consult the alligators. He returns and generally reports the sacrifice to be made of a mother, father, child, or some other loved relative, according to the designation of the alligators. If consent is given for the sacrifice, the person or candidate is cautioned to be brave hearted and fear nothing he may see or hear. The ceremony of initiation is most interesting but too long to be included here.

The people who deal with alligators for riches and evil designs say they have certain times to see the alligators at their houses. When the time arrives the husband instructs his wives to remain away from the house and allow no one to approach. As the Vais believe that the dead become animals and birds and vice versa, they say the alligators turn to beautiful maidens, and at their homes spend hours in the art of witchcraft. It is said that the alligator brings money in his mouth whenever they request it.

The Vais consider the owl the king of all witches. They say that some old king transformed himself into the owl and became the king of witchcraft. The owl is called húhu. Whenever the cry of this bird is heard they tremble with fear. And it is a common saying that when an owl sits upon a home at least one of its inmates is sure to die.

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS, DEATHS AND DANCES

Among the Vais, as throughout all West Africa, all the ceremonies have a social phase, and to this extent are social functions. So that without a careful inquiry into the aim of these ceremonies and what constitutes their distinguishing feature it is very easy to conclude that they all are the same. Fundamentally it has seemed to the writer that the various ceremonies of the Vais and other West Africans naturally divide themselves into two general classes: one with the dominant note of social enjoyment, and the other in which the religious spirit of sacrifice prevails.

Unlike the Yoruba and Ewe-speaking peoples the Vais have no ceremonies at the birth of their children. In this respect they differ from some of the other tribes in Liberia. When a Vai child is born, after a few days, some one of the elder relatives takes it from the room of its birth and names it after some member of the family, an ancestor, insect, animal, person or object in nature. The name of the child depends almost entirely upon the impression made by its birth, appearance, conduct or general surrounding circumstances. The name of the inventor of the Vai alphabet is Búkere; bu means gun and kere war. The two words together mean a war with guns and was no doubt going on at Búkere's birth. Búrkere gave this interpretation to Reverend Koelle personally. The writer knows and recalls Vai men with the following names: Kari, serpent; Wonye, ant; Vombe, rat; Wuro, baboon; Tuna, flying dog; Tie, chicken; Surisuri, mosquito, etc., and many others might be given in illustration of this practice. Perhaps now the most common name to be found among the Vais is Mormora, meaning Muhamud, that is among those of the Islamic faith.

The Vais have more than one name. When the child is born it is given its surname. When it enters the "Greegree Bush" it is given another name something like our Christian one; and upon the acceptance of Muhamudanism another is added, the last being always placed first. This is the key to the understanding of Vai names. Many are to be found like the name of the Vai inventor, Mormora Doalu Búkere.

Those who have only two names the supposition is that they have not entered the beri or they have not accepted Muham-mudanism.

Perhaps the first social ceremony in the life of the Vai individual is experienced on entering the sande and beri institutions. The boys receive on their backs the national mark and the second name, and are circumcised if they have not been when quite small, according to custom. The above is known as the beri-rite, in connection with which is prepared a large feast called the gbánu. Very often the dishes for this feast are prepared in town and not in the beri as formerly; so that you will more often hear this feast called the gbána-bo. Bo is a verb meaning to bring out, and is added to indicate the change in the place where the food is prepared. In both the beri and sande institutions they have a cleaned place in the forest known as fari, and in which all the beri and sande ceremonies are held. After the beri-rite and feast a great dance is held in the fari, accompanied by singing and the beating of drums.

The head of the sande is called Zo-sande, and of the beri, Zo-beri. When these institutions come to a close, for weeks the beri-moenu are the occasions of many social gatherings. Moenu is the plural of beri-mo and means one who has gone through the beri-rite. The first one begins when the Zo-ba brings them to the nearest town. All who have finished the beri and sande rites are held in the highest esteem, and many functions are given in their honor. They are dressed in the best attire their people can afford, and march through the streets of the town as though each one was walking for a prize. This is the great Vai commencement. To witness this brilliant and grand display people come in from all neighboring towns. Parents gather with their friends to see the evidences of what their children have learned.

Some come to eat, drink and be merry, while others yet to judge of the utility and efficiency of the greatest institutions of the tribe. Chickens, goats, bullocks, and African products combine for a large and sumptuous feast. After the dinner the dancing begins, and late at night one can hear the singing and the dull sound of drums keeping time for those still

held by the charms of the dance. When this "Big Play" is over the beri-moenu go to their home towns, and there they are received with great rejoicing and social functions, with all the native concomitants of eating and drinking and dancing.

Before these can get married, who have had the beri and sande rites, they must have a ceremony commonly called "Washing from the Devil and Greegree Bushes." Certain instructions are given in these institutions regarding the sexes, and it is believed that if they are violated by those trained in them, the violations will be attended by severe punishments. So in washing it is thought that the effect and force of the instructions are emphasized. After the washing a dinner is prepared, after which comes the dance with its music and singing. The washing and dinner are attended by the friends of the family whose entertainment and pleasure make up the social feature of the ceremony.

Whenever a death occurs among the important men and women of the tribe it is always followed by a "Big Play." And for more than a week relatives and friends come with presents to the bereaved family. The women shave their heads and weep in sackcloth and ashes, assisted by professional mourners. In the event that relatives required for the final burial are absent, a temporary grave is made in the house, usually in the kitchen, for from two weeks to a year. When all required have arrived, the body of the deceased is buried before the house, generally in the yard. A large feast is spread. The maidens dress and march through the streets. The singers sing, and the drums announce the merriment of the day. It is a social function in which everybody is supposed to participate. They dance until a late hour at night. From appearances no one, unfamiliar with African life, would think that a funeral ceremony was still being performed; and it continues for days and weeks in accord with the importance of the deceased.

The writer learned that this strange custom is founded on the belief that the dead are where they can behold the conduct of the living. The latter believe if they do not honor the dead with a "Big Play" as they honor the living, the

dead will be disappointed and visit upon them sickness, death, and other misfortunes. The influence of the feast and play varies with the wealth and distinction of the interested family.

The male relatives of the deceased as a mark of mourning wear a bana, a small ring of bamboo bark around their heads, while the females wear it about their necks. The death of a man of high standing generally leaves a number of widows. If a relative desires to marry one he may propose by sending her what they call a fara sunda, a bamboo-band. If she accepts the proposal she keeps the band; if she declines she returns it.

Doubtless the most distinguished gathering among the native Africans is at the coronation of their king. Many Vai men of importance and letters have tried to tell the writer of the magnificence of such occasions when in the past the Vais have crowned their real great kings. From them all it was gathered that it was the custom for the king to be attired in robes of scarlet or some brilliant color, adorned with tiger skins and especially made for this occasion. By the most skillful hands his robes are figured with the forms of various animals. Of silver and gold he wore the rarest designs of the most expensive native jewelry. His carved breastplate hung on his neck, and on his wrists were a number of leopard teeth. On his head he wore a hat or king's hat, ornamented with shells and the fur of animals. Attended with all his chiefs and warriors he appeared amid the music and beating of drums for the coronation.

The head medicine man sprinkles the king with powder and greases his face with oil and ointments. The king kneels before the medicine man. Volleys of shot are fired by the soldiers near by, and in a little while he is declared king. The king is then given a reception. A general dance is commenced, forming a circle about him; the music starts, the drums and clappers sound, and the dance continues. Expressive of admiration, now and then, a dancer or musician prostrates himself at the king's feet. And the ceremony is concluded for a while by serving drinks. Again he joins his subjects in partaking of the various native dishes, after which

he is ready for the final act of the ceremony. The king is seated on his stool or chair, ready for the sacrifice, when the poor victims were brought forward for their fate.

A sham battle follows in which the generals and warriors vie with each other in the exhibition of their military tactics and skill. From all the towns come the best singers, clappers, drummers, and other musicians, to make the music for a grand dance in the square which is usually in the center of the town. The Zo-bas or "Country Devils" lead the way for the best dancers of the country. From the circle to the square, from 1 to 300 women, trained in the art of the native dance, make many figures, and some of whom are so zealous and fantastic in their movements that they are borne exhausted from the dance.

It is hardly necessary to mention the dance as a social function. It is one of the principal features of all native gatherings of whatever nature. In all the ceremonies of the *beri* and *sande* institutions, the naming of children, of marriage and death, and the functions in honor of the king, the dance ranks with the feast. And these two together constitute the essence and are the chief forms of social expression among the West African Blacks. During suitable weather in almost every town there is a dance every evening. It is a common expression that "When the sun goes down all Africa dances."

But there are various kinds of dances. Besides the common dance, the *timbo*, there is *ziawa*, a dance accompanied by a peculiar kind of song; the *ngere*, another dance with a special song; and the *mazu*, a dance accompanied by wild gestures of the arms. In the *beri* and *sande* societies special instruction is given in all forms of the native dance, and many *Vai* women are graceful as well as highly proficient in this native art. For the customary "dashes," on lovely evenings, professional singers and dancers go from house to house, singing and dancing for the rich.